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ABSTRACT

Commonly accepted ideas, on the one hand, about how small groups in a writing class should work and, on the other hand, psychological research about what makes a small group work well are not consistent. Social psychologist Clovis Shepherd claims that the "popular notion that the democratic ideal is a group in which all members exert an equal amount of leadership may be a desirable ideology but it has little support in research." Shepherd, in reviewing research on small group dynamics, came up with several interesting criteria for a successful group: (1) each member knows what his or her role is; (2) the group takes action through consensus (all have a say and all give consent) rather than through majority vote or minority railroading; and (3) the group has full and open communication. Another social theorist, Cecil Gibb, adds another surprise: leadership, she maintains, is situational; that is, the leader is not an enduring role held by one person but the one that is filled by that person who at a particular moment can contribute the most. Observations of student small groups in a basic writing course support some of these findings. In one group, for instance, a group leader clearly emerged, and, as a result, all members considered the group successful. Had the instructor not been familiar with the above research, she might have interrupted the group's activity and tried to control the amount of talking and directing the leader was doing. Other groups provided less definitive contributions to the issue of group dynamics; the research on small groups, on the whole, has revealed "many trees and no forest." (TB)

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March, 1995

Lita Kurth: Democracy and Leadership in Basic Writing Small Groups

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I have very very mixed feelings about how we as instructors should respond to group characteristics (I mean ethnic and gender) that sometimes show up and other times don't, and still other times become much more complex than one is ever led to believe. Underlying this uneasiness is a concern that I imagine we all share: the wish to encourage democratic and empowering practices in the classroom. I've been trying to synthesize the small group theory of social psychology with a variety of studies and theories from composition. They come into conflict and I haven't found my way through the morass yet.

I conducted a global, ethnographic kind of study of ten or so small student groups in two basic writing classrooms If I were to characterize my idea of democracy upon undertaking this project, I would have to say that I felt it made a very uneasy alliance with the idea of leadership; at best it seemed a paradox; at worst, an oxymoron. I wondered if one would really need leaders in a democratic writing classroom. Why couldn't you just share everything equally? Everyone would get a turn to be the reporter, everyone would get a turn to be the recorder, everyone would read a paper, everyone give feedback. If any questions arose, the majority would rule. That way, I thought, people who have gotten the short end of the stick woudn't be neglected or dominated once again.

In my research, however, I encountered small group theory and group dynamics theory, especially that by social psychologist, Clovis Shepherd, which claimed baldly that"the popular notion that the democratic ideal is a group in which all members exert an equal amount of leadership may be a desirable ideology but it has little support in research." Furthermore, Shepherd claimed that once a group has begun "very little difference in "procedures, how decisions are made, and roles of members can be tolerated."

Shepherd, in reviewing the research on small group dynamics came up with several interesting criteria for a successful small group:

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1) It has **role differentiation.** Hmmm.....Each member's role is clear and known to himself and others. Hmmm.....He went on to say "It is important that official and unofficial leaders be known...and facilitate communication so that no member hesitates to contribute his ideas and feelings and so that some degree of shared influence is present."
2) The group **takes action not through majority vote or minority railroading but through consensus."** Hmmmm (Consensus, incidentally, is defined by Kurt Lewin as "where all members feel they have had their say and even though they may still have reservations, they are personally willing to express agreement.")
3) The group has **full and open communication.** No one withholds ideas or feelings.

Some of these criteria present a stumbling block for popular ideas of "equality" certainly and seem to suggest that insisting on equal participation may be not only impossible but counterproductive. Bales and Hare, two more social psychologists, have said "If only simple rotation is used, it may well be that what will occur is that the 'natural' task leader will be more indirect in his leadership, i.e., the leadership becomes hidden...."

And here's one more surprise. **Leadership is said to be situational** usually. Cecil Gibb, another social theorist, said "Leadership is not usually an enduring role...the momentary group leader is that person who is able to contribute most toward the common goal."

Well, I just had to test this out on my groups. I decided to individually interview all the members of all the groups in one classroom and see if all members agreed on who the leader was in each group, and then see, by my observations and their own reckoning, which groups were in fact successful groups. By success, I meant that they got their group-work done, they felt satisifed with their group, and they had a good experience.

I found one group at Small Town College that was a classic textbook case. It was Group Six, a group of four, all males, who agreed that the leader was T., a white male, though all the other members were non-whites. One member gave as a reason "T. sees more in-depth into the material, knows more than we do, helps us out with what he knows." T., himself, said of the group's leadership "Could be me because I end up talking a lot. If I don't talk, others don't. " In line with the idea of

leadership as a temporary thing, he added "In the past I wouldn't be like that. It's more out of necessity." All members of Group six felt they were cooperating. All felt they got something helpful out of the peer group, three out of four felt more relaxed in small group. (The fourth felt more relaxed in the whole class because he was seldom called on.) All liked the group and gave comments such as "I like those guys." "We all play supportive roles."

Observing this group from the outside, I know I would have assumed that something bad was going on. I might even have intervened and had somebody else act as the leader, thus probably pushing the leadership underground and disrupting the group. Strangely, it also shows a case in whch doing the most talking doesn't mean dominating. It can mean acting as an exemplar and an encouragement to others. Perhaps T. was in this case the person who was able to contribute most to the group's goal.

Another group, Group Three had a positive experience judging from self-reports. "It's fun." "I like our group. When we're not discussing anything, we just talk about life. We had a talk about religion. Should babies be baptized? I enjoyed it." "I like peer groups." "Everyone participated" They were not unanimous about who the leader was however. One suggested M., a white female, another suggested G., a African-American male, a third suggested C., a Filipina or T. a African-American female. In this case, the group seemed to function well even though leadership was apparently not known and roles not so differentiated. Comments about leadership in general however, were "It's usually the smartest one" or "It's the one who talks in class."

Group Two was not a very functional group since it suffered high absenteeism, low homework completion, and students who found the work hard. This group showed that, far from coveting leadership roles, some students find them onerous, even harrowing. One student, a African-American male from this, yet another all-male group, said about being spokesperson "I was forced to." At one point, when a spokesperson was called for, a African-American male said to a Hispanic male "You can do it" and the other replied resentfully "Thanks a lot for asking." Later, as their turn neared, one of the members said "We're doomed". When he thought he had finished his report and the teacher asked one more question,

he said "Oh shit. I thought it was over." and "Oh God." Leaderless groups are said to be in trouble and this one was.

To show again, how things are not always as they seem, one student, a Filipina, told me about a high school small group she had been in, composed of herself and nine boys. She said "I was the only girl so I pretty much did the whole thing. The guys were clowning around but some helped. I made each and every one report so that I didn't have to speak in front of the class. I said if they didn't read what I wrote, I'd take the whole thing back and get the whole grade myself. They easily agreed." Doing the most talking or speaking for the group may not necessarily mean leadership. In this case, I think it is pretty clear who was in charge.

Overall, students gave the following reasons for leadership: the leader was willing to be the spokesperson, was most outspoken, did the most talking, got others to talk, explained things well, was an ice-breaker, saw in depth, helped out with comprehension, had work done, was more vocal, was really active.

What was surprising to me was that all of these students in each classroom had received the same training and modeling; yet there was still a great variety of experience in small groups in each classroom. Also, some of the students who had been insuccessful small groups on previous occasions did not have success this particular semester. It was also interesting to observe that the same group on separate occasions could be successful or unsuccessful. Even group two, the leaderless group, did have one peer response session that seemed fairly successful.

I joke sometimes that my research revealed all trees and no forest. I would be happy to share Microsoft Word 4.0 diskettes of my entire thesis with interested parties. As of 8/1/95, my address is 3655 Pruneridge Avenue, #54, Santa Clara, CA 95051. My on-line address is yluj@aol.com.